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How the Hard Sell On SALT Backfired

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President Carter's hard sell to persuade the Senate that Moscow can't cheat on the new strategic arms limitation treaty shows signs of backfiring, demonstrating anew his administration's propensity for falling into traps of its own making.

The backfire, clearly audible in Senate cloakroom gossip even among pro-Carter, pro-SALT senators, carries this warning for Jimmy Carter: Lack of a serious, well-coordinated political strategy to carry his great SALT II project through the Senate may trigger the worst defeat of his presidency. To make up for that absent strategy, Carter is now engaging in Carter-style hyperbole, which is costing him potentially valuable SALT allies.

In the face of sharply conflicting testimony from his highest military and intelligence officials, Carter told the American Newspaper Publishers Association last week that the new treaty "will be verifiable from the first day it is signed." That statement will haunt the hearing rooms of the Senate's Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees when Defense Secretary Harold Brown and CIA Director Stansfield Turner testify on the new treaty. Both have publicly disagreed with it.

Far more than Carter, Turner and Brown have been circumspect in predicting when American monitoring may be able to recover from the loss of two CIA stations near the Soviet border in Iran. Turner estimated full recovery could take up to five years; Brown, even though under White House pressure to minimize the problem, said in a carefully crafted statement April 17 that it would "take about a year."

The discrepancy between Carter and the Turner-Brown team is no laughing matter to senators, some of whom feel Carter is not leveling with them or the nation in his zeal to ward off defeat in the Senate. What has made his position on the explosive verification issue even more worrisome to the Senate is the personal way he is reacting to rising skepticism about verification.

"He acts as though we were calling him a liar just because we ask questions," one verification skeptic told us.

That defensive mood of presidential defiance toward genuine Senate concern over Soviet cheating is compounding Carter's political problem. Instead of conceding that real questions about verification do exist, Senate critics say he is treating the debate like an anti-Carter plot.

At least as troubling to the Senate is the surprising failure of the administration's early warning system to detect trouble on the verification front. Despite the virtually certain loss in the Iranian revolution of the top-rated Kabkhan monitoring station (capable of line-of-sight interception of missile telemetry seconds after a test launch), orders were not issued to devise substitute ways to monitor SALT II.

Only weeks before the predictable January departure of the deposed shah of Iran, Carter's budget chief, James T. McIntyre, cut more than \$100 million from Turner's fiscal year 1980 budget request for new verification monitors—presumably satellites. When Turner recently testified before a closed-door session of the Senate Intelligence Committee, his defense of McIntyre's cut, though obviously intended to show a united administration front, infuriated some senators.

The Senate committee is now recommending that the cut be restored and that, as one committee Democrat told us, the president order a "crash program" to build up U.S. monitoring to pre-Iranian revolution levels.

Carter failed to foresee that extra spending to enhance verification would serve his political purpose in the Senate debate. That failure was compounded by leaked administration reports that the high-flying U2 spy plane might be used as a stopgap verification tool. This tactic quickly backfired. Most experts doubt the U2 could lift the antennas needed to pick up missile telemetry—performance data radioed from a Soviet missile test.

Even if it could, however, there is today no assurance of advance notice of Soviet tests and therefore no sure way of knowing when the U2 should take off to do its monitoring.

But most important, administration officials say the U2 ploy could work only with Turkish overflight rights. Yet Turkish politicians have flatly informed the administration there is no chance for such overflights. U.S.-Turkish relations are poor, partly because Carter last year decided to jettison a new U.S.-Turkish Defense Cooperation Agreement painfully negotiated in the Ford administration.

Little wonder, then, that Carter's performance in the verification crisis—the first in what may be months of crises in his battle for SALT II—has left many senators dissatisfied and vaguely disquieted. The more he protests their raising questions about verification, the more questions they will raise—both about verification and about the credibility of Jimmy Carter.

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